Mohan Das Karamchand Gandhi: Spiritual Guru or Political Leader?

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Introduction

Any biography is intersected by the biographer, by her interests and the questions that are raised in her mind. Each biographer approaches the subject of scrutiny with their own aptitude, theoretical training and most importantly the specific areas of enquiry that seem important from their perspective. My interest in Gandhi was stimulated by the impact of Gandhi and his movement observed by me in the remotest parts of India, where even among people, otherwise insulated from the mainstream of Indian society, his influence had reached and also made a difference in their lives. There have been protracted debates about Gandhi, about his shortcomings, his failings and even some have questioned his values and norms. Yet to me he appeared as a person who could achieve where everyone else failed. He was a truly inspirational figure, a man who inspired my westernized father to give up on wearing suits and take to wearing simple Indian clothes for his entire life, beginning from the time he attended Gandhi's funeral. In a remote Himalayan village away I found that everyone from old to young was literate because at some time in the past, Gandhian workers had come to teach them. I was told that since the villages in the high altitude were difficult to reach from the plains, Gandhi had devised a simple plan. He asked the educated worker from the plains to teach the villagers at the bottom. Then those who became literate would go one level higher and teach the ones just above them, and so on till the last and highest village was reached. In this way education and literacy had reached the most remote villages, the ones that I

studied on the Indo-Tibet border (Channa 2013). In another village in Rajasthan, the village untouchable workers had been provided with raw material by Gandhian workers who came with a charkha (spinning wheel) loaded on a donkey cart, one fine morning, and asked the untouchables to stop working for free for the villagers, as unpaid village servants and take up their own spinning and weaving and the Gandhi inspired Khadi Gramudyog would market their products. This particular commercial chain, run by the state, helps ground level workers to achieve economic independence through supplying them with raw materials and then selling their products. In this village, the people of Meghwal community were provided with raw wool, as they were weavers, and the products were being marketed by the Khadi Gramudyog. As a result in just about a decade or so, the economic status of the Meghwals has improved significantly and now were able to look the upper castes in the face in stead of being always subservient.

Gandhi is venerated by Indians not just as the 'Father of the Nation' but also as a saint, a sage. How necessary was it for Gandhi to have had the image of a renouncer, a sage? Would it have been possible for him to lead millions of Indians if he did not have the image of a spiritual leader? In India, spirituality has always been accorded the highest status and a spiritual leader attracts more followers than anyone else. As analysed by scholars of religion such as Geertz (1974),the sacred demands unquestioning submission, it is beyond the level of rationality and hence of any doubt or questions. Gandhi could persuade millions of people to follow him as in his Dandi March (The Salt Satyagraha) and also persuade them to rise to impossible heights like not retaliating with violence when beaten or hit by sticks, only because he was regarded as a *sant*, a saint. For the Indians masses it was not possible to relate only to speeches by political leaders. The Indian people, over centuries and by tradition had accepted the rulers (any ruler) only according to their deeds and given them divine or near divine status. But this was also a fragile construction, one that could crumble easily if the ruler was seen as despotic or cruel. Not

only the ruler but the state itself, or importantly the place of one's birth (*janmabhoomi*), was seen as sacred within the Indian cosmology.

At the time of what is designated as the Freedom Struggle, the concept of a nation was relatively unknown to most as most people owed allegiance to the local feudal state which ruled them. Some parts would be held together by a common allegiance whenever a larger state established itself, like the Moghul Empire that preceded British rule but most common people knew only the local rulers and owed allegiance to community and caste, In the earliest years of the struggle for freedom, an attempt at unity was attempted by casting the nation in the image of a Goddess. This image of Bharat Mata (the original of which is in Victoria Memorial Museum in Calcutta) along with the salutation VandeMataram (Salute to the Mother); was the key symbol used to construct the nation as a concrete image. As is understood, the nation is a constructed entity (Anderson 1991) and for millions of Indians internally divided by caste, religion, language and ethnicity; unification was only possible under a sacred Key Symbol(Ortner).

In accordance with the same sentiments, there was no better way to mobilise the masses than by a person who cast himself in the image of a saint. This was the image of Gandhi, first and foremost as a spiritual leader, an upholder of moral values, that swayed the people of the subcontinent that later assumed the identity of the Indian nation. Even today, when Indians speak about Gandhism, it is to talk about moral values and a specific way of life. Naipaul (2010:303) has reproduced the narration of an Indian trade union leader, 'The trade union movement in India based itself on the principles of Gandhian philosophy: truth and non-violence, duty before right: you produce before you make demands'. Gandhi drew much of his philosophy from the Gita, especially about performance of duty with no heed to returns. Entire generations of Indians had been inspired by the Gandhian ideologies and only in the twenty-first century one can

observe a movement towards more materialist and right-wing ideologies.

Gandhi is symbolic of not just a political struggle but of the establishment on an entire mode of non-violent protest, possibly never seen before in history. Even today many highly successful protests and mass participation of civic society is made possible only through the Gandhian methods, the latest of which was staged by a community of Muslim women in Delhi, against the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA).

In order to motivate the masses the role of an ascetic, a spiritual leader, a Mahatma, was a necessity that perhaps motivated Gandhi to take on the mantle of the Naked Fakir, as he was known. Gandhi therefore needs to be understood against the back drop of the Indian ethos as well as the social and geo-political realities of the sub-continent.

It is very important to understand that in India, the political and moral universes intersect and the highest power is spiritual power, at least conceptually although only in rare cases, actual. One may also see this in the efforts made by Mr.Narendra Modi, the present populist leader and prime minister, with his cultivated ascetic looks and his bachelor status, to pass as a sage.

Gandhi's Journey

Family

On the 2nd of October, 1869, the fourth child of Putli Bai and Karamchand Gandhi was born in the small town of Porbandar, in the Western coastal region of India. No one knew at that time that this date would forever be declared as a national holiday in India, to mark the birth anniversary of a man who would be recognised as the Father of the Indian nation that was to come into its own many decades later in the year 1947. It was an upper middle- class household with enough resources and Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi grew up in a comfortable home but with a strict moral upbringing that restricted

him to be a vegetarian and teetotaller for the rest of his life. His mother belonged to a sect that considered the Quran, the Bible and the Hindu texts to be identical and leading to the same divinity, a form of belief not uncommon to many Hindus derived from the ancient Vedic statement that there is but one truth, only the wise men explain it differently (*Ekam Sat, Vipra Vahudha Vadanti*). At the same time, she believed strongly in self-control and a truthful life. It is her life of frequent and prolonged fasting that inspired Gandhi, in his later life, to indulge in fasts that lasted for long periods of time. He also learnt self-control and a life style based not on indulgence but on austerity and renunciation.

From his biographies one gets a glimpse of a hyperactive and rebellious childhood perhaps indicating an adult hood that would seek to flout norms and set its own boundaries. Belonging to an upper class and caste family in the late nineteenth century in Gujarat; he was engaged to a girl, Kastur, from a rich and aristocratic family. She was a few months older to him and they were betrothed when they were six years old. The marriage took place when they entered their teens, at the age of thirteen. Gandhi was a precocious and libidinal young adult who entered into active sexual relations with his teen bride almost immediately. But this sexuality was driven by lust and patriarchal values of control rather than by any feelings of affection. Writing about his sexual life, the psychoanalyst Erik Erikson writes that,' One thing is devastatingly certain nowhere is there any suggestion of joyful intimacy'(1969:121). From teenage libidinous interest to feelings of guilt about sex is what haunted Gandhi in his married life. The guilt arose from the fact that when his father died, Gandhi was engaged in sex with his wife, rather than being at his bedside like a dutiful son. All his life this led to strained relation between him and his eldest son, whom he considered as born in sin. Gandhi remained unusually strict and aloof from his first born that resulted in the latter becoming a delinquent and social drop out (Adhar 2016).

Although Gandhi always advocated for equality between husband and wife; in his relationship with Kasturba, he displays an ambivalence that is not shown by him in any other aspect of his life. He always considered her to be stronger than him but also expected her to comply to all his whims. He forced her into an asexual ascetic life when he felt that he should devote himself to a life of devotion and service to humanity. He told his wife bluntly, when they were in their early thirties and after the birth of their fourth child, that they would henceforth live as friends but with no sexual relationship al all. She, the devout Hindu wife agreed to his proposal with no protest. But Kasturba was not always compliant with all his desires. She had refused point blank to take up studies and become educated, a fact that continued to bother Gandhi for the rest of their lives. He always regretted that he could not bring enough domination on his wife to educate her. He also attributed this failure to the sexual attraction that he felt for her and which prevented him from being too strict. He had remarked that if he had maintained an asexual stance, his wife would have become an educated woman.

Gandhi, the great leader was neither a particularly good son nor a good father for his own sons. Although his relation with his wife was very strong and lasted their life-time, it was perhaps the extraordinary power of endurance from her side, rather than any kind of tenderness from his, that led to their bonding. She was proud to be his wife because like everyone else, she too considered him to be a great soul (*Mahatma*), a person to be admired and worshipped more than to be loved.

A singular effort made by him throughout his life was to develop an androgynous personality perhaps also to be independent of his wife. During his life in England, where he was living alone, he learnt to cook for himself as vegetarian food to his liking was not available. He was also a good housekeeper, proficient like a woman in household tasks. This self-sufficiency was also a key to his later political and social life where he was able to manage by himself, not having to rely on anyone else. As described by Erikson (1969:146), it was his

relationship with his mother that had the greatest influence on his life. He tried hard to retain all the values that his mother had taught him and his recourse to Satyagraha, a peaceful form of protest through fasting, was inspired by his mother's teachings. In this was Gandhi was akin to many other Indian men in whose lives, mothers continue to play a most crucial role (Channa 2013).

Education

The education system of British India, into which Gandhi was born and educated, had a distinct character. The British found in India a vast, complex and extremely wealthy colony and realized that to control this empire they needed local cooperation. The Indian society was already fully urbanized and ruled by elite groups, a situation that the British found much to their liking as it reflected their own hierarchical system. They successfully managed to rule India through its own elite, but they needed to manipulate the elite to cooperate with them as against the interests of their own people. The best method that they could devise to achieve this goal with least conflict was to somehow control the people's minds, rather than try to dominate them by force alone. This was a great conspiracy of the Empire, one that was operationalized through the scheme of an education policy largely the brainchild of Lord Thomas Babington Macauley. As Benedict Anderson has described, Macauley's project was to convert Indians to Englishmen in their minds and attitudes; a transformation that was directed to get them to owe allegiance to the British from their own hearts and voluntarily. He wished to raise a generation of educated Indian middle class who would be 'Indian in origin but culturally English' (Anderson 1991:90).

However, although this project of formal education in the English language did produce a generation of what in India is known as 'Brown Sahibs'; and who helped Pax Britannia rule India by being loyal to the Crown and serving the British diligently, the very same education also produced dissidents and the leaders of the 'Quit India' movement. Gandhi obtained his legal degree and license to practice from the Lincoln's Inn in London and his higher education in England

added to the cosmopolitan dimension of his personality. He learned Latin and French and added to his existing knowledge of English and mother tongue Gujarati and Hindi made him a person well versed in languages. He became an erudite scholar, writing large numbers of volumes in later life, much of it autobiographical.

The initial emergence of a personality after completing education in England was that of a dandy, a perfectly dressed English gentleman conforming to the image of Indian by birth and English by heart conceptualized by Macauley. But all that changed after he established himself in his very successful practice in South Africa. From here the realization of the racism of colonial rule and the ignominy of being a colonial subject began to dawn upon him. The seeds of dissent against external colonization began to be sown in his heart from here itself. In this he was among many other highly educated and qualified Indians who saw light and realized their subordinate position as a result of western education.

To understand this let us first discuss how average Indians look upon and legitimize their rulers.

The Ideal Ruler as Imagined by Indians

What is known today as the Indian nation was a vast conglomerate of feudal principalities and small kingdoms which have been undergoing political transformations of various kinds over the years; right from the time of the earliest known cities of the Harappan Civilization. Different rulers at different periods of time had consolidated their empires, only to lose them over the generations and giving rise to different empires under different rulers.

There was a huge ethnic and religious diversity of the rulers. Many of them became part of the Indian soil and are today, Indians, like the earliest groups that came from Central Asia and around in the pre-historical times. There is still uncertainty about the Indo-Aryans, who they were and how many waves of such people came, but there certainly was a change over from the Harappan to a different kind of civilization identified as the Vedic Civilization and a precursor to the

present Hindu identity (Thapar 2002: 12-14). After the attack by Greek emperor Alexander and his withdrawal, Indo-Greek kings continued to rule small kingdoms in India from the second to the first centuries B.C.E. (Walsh 2011:52). From the period beginning 319-20 C.E the mighty Gupta kingdom was established and ruled over most of Northern India. As described by Thapar (2002: 185) this kingdom, although centred around Delhi, extracted tributes from smaller kings right up to the South and also from Nepal and Punjab, that were independent entities. This period established hegemony of Vedic Hindu culture and the Sanskrit language that was accepted as the dominant literary and court language. But Prakrit and other local languages were primarily used by the masses. The continuity of the local cultures, languages and dialects continued even as Sanskrit was up rooted by Persian and Arabic as India came under a long period of Islamic rule by various rulers from Turkey, Iran and Central Asia.

The Southern part of India was politically and culturally separate from the North and different kings and lineages ruled there. The East coast also has a long trading relationship with Rome, the Arab and other countries. The Arabs also settled permanently on the West and South from the 8th and 9th centuries. There was always a tradition of leaving people to their own cultures and religions and Christians and Muslims were free to practice their own ways.

What is important to be noted is that the vast majority of people, both in rural and urban areas were not directly concerned with who was ruling them? The rulers were legitimized by their actions and not by their ethnic or religious identities. The masses expected justice and compassion from the rulers who were also expected to uphold '*dharma*'. Dharma in Indian cosmology means appropriate behaviour, where appropriate is according one's location in the social world. The ruler had his or her dharma and it was expected that the ruler would look after the welfare of the people, protect them overall act like a parent, nurturing, caring and shielding them from all harm.

The masses have almost always been separated from the elites and the rulers by language and ways of life. The Indian concept of 'Jati'

(Channa 2018) enables the Indians, irrespective of religion, to accept the diversity and cultural uniqueness of varieties of people. They have continued to speak their languages and follow their own ways of life; even as the identities of the rulers changed, ethnically, linguistically and religiously. To them therefore the British were no different from the Mughals who were ruling over most of India when it passed into British hands. There were many local rulers too, of different designations. The Indian masses did not have the sense of 'nationalism' and national identity as was evolved, though only partially, later. The resistance to British occupation was put up by various rulers because they feared the loss of their own sovereignty. Their people had supported them because of their allegiance of self-interest to specific centres of power. In the absence of an unified Indian identity there was no collective resentment against the British as such.

Following their own agenda, the British began to educate Indians, mostly from the upper castes and classes of India, the ones who had both the curiosity and the resources to go for a formal education of the European kind. These, mostly men, although there were a handful of women from very early times, were already in privileged positions. They were accustomed to giving orders, not taking them. They were ruling over servants, dependents and generally had high self-esteem and pride in themselves. But, the exposure to western education made them aware that they were in a subordinate position. They were regarded as inferior and subordinate by the British, who they, as high caste/class Indians actually held in contempt, as *Mleccha,* as people with an inferior culture and way of life. Those not following the purity and pollution norms of Brahmancial Hinduism were considered as ritually impure and 'untouchables', a category that includes all Europeans. These elite Indian men were inheritors of ancient traditions and valued their own ways of life and their family and kin ties. Although a large number did turn into brown skinned Englishmen, the others, even as they imbibed the knowledge of language and culture, realized that the values of Equality, Universal

Brotherhood and Human Rights as preached by the Europeans as an aspect of their own civilization was not applicable to them.

All the leaders of the initial political movements to oust the British rulers were formally educated in the western system and well versed in European languages and the more they read European philosophy and literature, the more they began to realize that the notions of nationalism, nation and identity. To the illiterate masses the rulers were '*Maai-Baap*' (a term that denotes parents, both mother and father). They did not bother about the ethnicity of the rulers but only about their performance. The masses had a tradition of revolt but only if they felt the rulers were transgressing their dharma (duty).There were many local revolts of the peasants and indigenous people against the British administrators, including the famous Indigo Revolt where the peasants rose in an uprising against forced Indigo cultivation. But these were specifically directed against what the people saw as lapses on the part of the rulers, who seemed to disregard the welfare of the people. The loss of legitimacy was linked to specific acts of violence and injustice. These were not motivated by generalized principles of nationalism and identity.

Under such conditions the masses could only be mobilised by a leader who could take on the mantle of being a '*mai-baap*' to them. Brass (1994:26) has written that 'It is a recurring feature of Indian political history that only a charismatic leader with a simple appeal can unite the sub-continent or any of its larger people for a political purpose'. Although Brass does not elaborate on what he considers as 'simple appeal'; a analysis of the manner in which people assign legitimacy to their rulers explains in a nut shell how the ruler is viewed. India having been an ancient civilization with some of the earliest cities in the world like Mohenjo Daro and Harappa, the duties of a king or ruler have been elaborated in its classical texts quite explicitly. These have been made explicit in oral traditions and in recurrent rituals such as the annual enactment of the Ramlila, depicting the life of Rama, the ideal ruler. The trope of Ram-Rajya (Rule of Rama) is part of the political rhetoric frequently used by Indian leaders and was first used

by Gandhi. The illiterate and less education masses that still form the bulk of India's population, imbibe their vision and expectations of an ideal ruler from these inherited cultural forms. Rama is shown as democratic and just; giving an ear to the humblest of his people. An ideal ruler also enhances his prestige by leading an ascetic life and devoting himself to the care of his people. The word '*seva*' meaning service with devotion is often evoked as the ideal dharma or duty of the ruler towards his people.

Following this world-view, a charismatic leader in India is always one who evokes the image of spirituality and asceticism as well as exhibits parental solicitude. Gandhi was able to cast himself in this role with great aptitude. He was truly spiritual but with this worldly rather than other worldly spiritualism. At the same time, he was an astute politician, a rational and highly intelligent lawyer as well as a man of global vision.

The Making of the Mahatma

I have borrowed this sub-title from a film of this name that showed how Gandhi turned into an ascetic from a highly materially successful lawyer.

Many people have a critical turning point event in their lives that changes them for ever. For Gandhi it was a train ride in Pretoria that proved to be that turning point when he became painfully aware of the racism, subordination and humiliation of being colonized. At that time, he was one of the most successful lawyers in South Africa and had bought a first- class train ticket to travel in Pretoria. But he was unceremoniously thrown out on the platform by a white guard who could not accept that a black man could travel in first class. The shock to a man who considered himself highly educated, rich and professionally established; to realize that his skin colour and his subordinate political identity could render him a pariah; was enormous. In a flash almost he realized that he needs to break out his shackles, reorganize his life and devote himself to liberating all people from colonial rule. There have been accusations about Gandhi

following a racist attitude when he was an upper class lawyer in South Africa. The shock to a man who considered others inferior because of their culture and ethnicity must have been great when he found that he was on the receiving end of racism.

His innate humanism was further aroused when he saw the indifference of the whites towards black bodies when they refused to give any treatment to wounded Zulus during the war with the Zulus. Gandhi organized Peace Corps to tend to them. At this time, he also finally decided to give up all material things and embrace celibacy. He and his wife were both thirty-one years old and parents to four sons. He thereafter moved his family to an ashram where everyone led a life of strict austerity and physical toil. Everything that was consumed was grown in the ashram and there was also complete equality and sharing.

From this point in his life Gandhi's only aim was to transcend the corporeal and material and strive for spiritual perfection but at the same time his goals were political in the sense that he wished to transform society into an ideal ethical space. His striving was not just to change himself but to change everything around him. In this sense he was not a spiritual person who withdrew from the material world but one who strove to transform it. One of Gandhi's most often quoted statement is, 'Be the change you want to see'. He lived his life exactly according to his own ethics, without any heed to any kind of personal, emotional or physical discomfort.

His strict discipline, his unbending and uncompromising attitude towards his convictions led to the ruin of the life of his eldest and son and also to some extent to the death of his wife. At the end of her life, he refused medical intervention to treat her for her pneumonia. He refused the doctor to give her an injection, as he considered the hypodermic needle as violence. He recognized his own stubbornness and has commented on his ability to push people into extremes of action.

His immense charisma was the aura of spirituality that attracted the Indian masses, who followed him like they would follow a Guru, a divinity. For the Indian masses to obey and follow a spiritual leader was a natural choice as faith overrules reason for most. Yet the causes for which he protested were not religious but highly political. The largest gathering of people that he managed was during what is known as the 'Salt Satyagraha' that mobilised thousands of people against the British government to protest against a tax put on the common salt. To Gandhi the poorest of poor also need salt as an essential item of consumption and this tax would hit them.

Politically he realized that this was a cause that would unite the entire mass of people in India. It was also a symbolic act that hit directly at the British empire and exposed their injustice towards the lowly masses. To the general public this act was unworthy of a sovereign and they saw in Gandhi a messiah who would deliver them from injustice. A majority of Indians also look upon non-violence as a virtue and Gandhi's method of non-violence protest appealed to them as a mode that would also protect them from the performance of bad 'karma' (deeds). To Gandhi the method was even more important than the goal. To him, anything obtained illegally or by unethical methods was a sin, violence against truth. Gandhi had interpreted truth as virtue and as the ethical; the right way to do something. In this sense he believed that truth was also logical and could be ascertained through debate and experimentation. To find the right path one had to do what one did in science, one had to look for it, experiment to get to it. He called his biography. 'My Experiments with Truth'.

It is unprecedented that Gandhi managed to draw to him, followers not only from India but from among the British also, apart from global admirers. The relationship of the British to India had always been different from their relation to other colonised countries. The Indian civilization and its rich repertoire of philosophy and knowledge had found followers and admirers from the period of the East India Company rule, such as Sir William Jones, who nurtured

what is known as New Orientalism, a phase of admiration for ancient India. With the conquest of Bengal in 1776 Warren Hastings began a process of formation of an Indo-European identity, trying to establish a long and ancient linkage between India and Europe that had been given the final touch by the foundation of the Asiatic Society in Calcutta in 1786. With India losing its sovereignty to England in 1857, much of the admiration for India was transformed to contempt (Trautmann 2004); but with Gandhi and some other western educated Indians who became spiritual leaders such as Swami Vivekananda and Sri Aurobindo, some of the admiration began to return. There was a gendered response to these men as British women were in particular attracted to these charismatic Indian men. Both Vivekananda and Aurobindo had drawn British women to attach to them as their closest followers as had Gandhi.

An interesting and important aspect of the British educated Indians who were very active in the Freedom movement was that even when they were politically ousting the British, at the personal level, cordial relations and even friendship ties existed between the two. Writing about the peak of the Quit India movement, noted historian Charles Allen writes, ‘It says a lot for both sides that throughout this penultimate chapter of the Raj friendships between individual British and Indians not only survived but frequently prospered (Allen 2008: 249).

Gandhi similarly had many friends among the British, both men and women, many of whom were his admirers and some became his followers. His charisma was not confined to his own country but spread far and wide, making him a global leader rather than simply a local one. The recourse to a non-violent mode of protest was perhaps an adjunct to such a relationship as also the fairly tolerant attitude of the British authorities towards such protestors. While the British dealt strictly and with violence towards the armed rebels, they did not resort to excessive violence towards unarmed protestors, although some degree of coercion was used. The exception was the Jalianwala

Bagh massacre that left hundreds of peaceful people dead, who had just congregated for a religious celebration.

The uniqueness of Gandhi lay in his crafting a bi-sexual image of himself, consciously imbibing feminine qualities to add to his essentially masculine self. Perhaps this was done in deference to the Hindu imagery of the divinity as bi-sexual, as combining feminine and masculine properties; Purusa and Sakti, in order to reach greater spiritual levels.

The Feminine Gandhi

His biographers, Erik Erikson and David Hardiman have been both concerned with the peculiar trend that Gandhi followed of crafting himself into a feminine personality imbibing what he considered the feminine traits of non-violent opposition and civility' (Hardiman 2003:xii). More elaborately Erikson (1969: 194) writes, 'the experience of witnessing the outrages perpetrated on black bodies by white he-men aroused in Gandhi both a deeper identification with the maltreated and a stronger aversion against all male sadism'. Further as Erikson has analysed as a psychoanalyst, to Gandhi the sexual act appeared as violence against the female body, a perception that perhaps led to his abstaining from all sexual contact at the prime of his youth.

Moreover, as a leader he opted for the path of cooperation and non-violence, following his mother's example of undertaking self-purifying fasts rather than launching an attack on the enemy. Throughout his political career he negotiated rather than fought, sought to understand the mind of his opponents and to also anticipate their moves. The latter qualities he had developed as a lawyer, that accounted for his great professional success and later when applied in politics they also proved generally productive. Erikson quotes Gandhi, ' ---to kill and be killed was relatively easy, to know how to die without killing and to make one's death count for life-that was the question'. Gandhi's form of non-violent protest , by fasting, by non-

cooperation, has spread to dissenters in all parts of the world and remains even today a most potent political weapon.

The Satyagrahis (those doing a non-violent form of protest) use their own body as a tool. While in South Africa he had created two women's groups, named as 'Tolstoy sisters' and 'Phoenix sisters' who used the shock tactics of crossing forbidden political lines. By exposing themselves to danger and possible death, they made powerful political statements of protest. During the Quit India movement, thousands of Satyagrahis or Peaceful protestors, following the same principles braved bullets and sticks, without raising a finger. The police found it increasingly difficult to beat down on passive bodies who offered no resistance.

Gandhi recognized the inherent spiritual qualities of women and their connection with life itself, for they braved death to give birth. Each time a woman gives birth she faces a possible death (maternal deaths were very high in his times but are still a part of every mother's birthing experience). His admiration for feminine virtues made him consciously nurture these qualities in himself. Even before he took to politics, he had read all about child care and child birth and was actively involved in assisting the birth of his fourth son (Fischer 1962: 53). He also helped his wife in all domestic work and later, in his ashrams he strictly forbade the gendered division of labour. All the ashram inmates, irrespective of gender were expected to partake of all the tasks. In fact, it was his insistence on complete equality between men and women that led him into accepting an asexual life style as to him the sexual act itself was unequal, one that subjugated the woman.

As pointed out by Erikson (1969:44) the Indian cosmology has an inherent bisexual character as it gives equal importance to both the male and female principles in its concept of divinity. An average Hindu does not think of God only as male, in fact more often female than male as Mother Goddesses play a powerful role in religious life. The principle male deities are also incomplete without their consorts and no Hindu household ritual can be performed without a female partner. Following this world view Gandhi had tried to cultivate

himself into a complete man, which according to Hindu ideology incorporates all the feminine attributes as well. 'The total image is one in which it is difficult to allocate masculine and feminine identifications' (Erikson 1969:105) and further, 'I wonder whether there ever has been another political leader who almost prided himself on being half-man and half-woman, and who so blatantly aspired to be more motherly than women born to the job, as Gandhi did' (Erikson 1969: 402). Ashish Nandy, an eminent Indian sociologist has written about Gandhi that he was a critic of the West who nevertheless drew upon Christian, Humanist and anti-industrial values, which he felt had been marginalized within the colonial regimes that were built around capitalist exploitation rather than the principles of compassion ideally preached in Christianity. Even while he professed himself a staunch Hindu, he was aware that his doctrine of non-violence was not really a part of Hindu teachings but of Buddhist and Jain origins. One may compare his perspective to the militant Hinduism being preached by the far right Hindutva ideologists. 'Above all he understood how to free activism from masculinity, courage from aggression and political conflict from hatred' (Nandy 1983 :748).

Gandhi therefore broke away from the western model of construction of identity, moving closer to what would be acceptable to the Indian masses. He strove towards genuine spirituality, equating it with truth, but also with service towards humanity. His efforts at nation building were not directed towards a political realization of power but towards a possible universal welfare. His opposition to colonial rule was not because he resented the colonial rule in itself but he resented and vehemently opposed its actions such as domination, cruelty, violence and racism. The Gandhian movement's universal appeal lies in that it transcended specific nationalism or individual interests for a more universal philosophy that was to have universal validity. Gandhi did not fight just for the freedom of his country; he fought for certain principles and values. He always insisted that he was fighting not only for Indians but for the British as well, those who were suffering in

their own country. It was the sufferings of the people colonized that required that they should be free as even the people already in a free country needed to be liberated from the specific forms of violence to which they were subjected by their own rulers. His vision for himself and for other political leaders was not one of amassing power for self but for achieving the goals of universal welfare. His vision of a free India was one where the lowest and the humblest would have dignity of life and will not be discriminated against. His vision of economic development was to build from the bottom and not the top. He did not agree with the classical economic model of the trickle- down effect, but wanted that the weakest should be strengthened first and the powerful should participate in this process.

The entrepreneurs and businessmen were urged by him to toil for the country and not for their own consumption and pleasure. He inspired an entire generation of Indian entrepreneurs, who led simple ascetic lives, helped move India into self sufficiency and economic independence, far more than most other post-colonial nations. Even today the richest of Indian business men lead fairly sedate lives, are mostly vegetarian and teetotallers as well as family men. Although the post-colonial Indian state followed a western and top-down model of development, Gandhian principles still pervade Indian social and political life.

Gandhi and his Detractors

Like everyone else, Gandhi too had his critics and detractors. The Hindu fundamentalists, who began to raise their head were critical of Gandhi's support for non-violence, taking as their ideal, the militant *sanyasis* depicted in the novel Anandamath, written by Bankim Chandra Chatterjee, based on the real history of militant ascetics of Eastern India. Opposing the liberal, inclusive and modern vision of the nation as territorial entity composed of citizens of all hues; an ethnic, religious nationalism emerged in the early twentieth century led by intellectuals such as Bal Gangadhar Tilak who began the Ganesh festival in 1893 and opposed all reforms to the ancient ways of the Hindus. The Hindu Mahasabha was founded in 1915 by Madan

Mohan Malviya and the RSS (Rashtriya Swam Sevaks) in 1925 by Keshav Baliram Hedgewar. The last named was a militant Hindu organization responsible for the assassination of Gandhi. The present regime in power in India is drawn from the RSS cadres and although paying lip service to Gandhi at the top level, is peopled by many detractors from Gandhian ideology. They have made aggression and divisiveness an integral part of Hindu ideology and prefer to sing Vande Mataram, used as a war song in the novel Anandamath, by Hindu ascetics as they waged war on the British rulers than the more inclusive national anthem written by the poet Rabindranath Tagore. Gandhi and Tagore were close in their views and mutually admired each other and the latter had eulogized Gandhi as a saint and great soul in his songs.

There were two others, less bigoted but ideological opposers of Gandhi, who admired him immensely but critiqued him on his methods and beliefs.

The first of these was Baba Saheb Ambedkar, the leader of the untouchables, who came from within them. He founded the powerful Dalit movement to protest the historical injustice done to the most degraded of the Hindu communities. Gandhi too was staunchly opposed to untouchability and had his own way of dealing with it. He preferred to call the untouchables, Harijans (People of God) and sought to reform them using his own model, comprising of giving them a life of dignity but which largely comprised of following caste Hindu ideals of purity, physical cleanliness and conformity to puritanical norms. He attempted to bring everyone within the same moral universe.

Ambedkar on the other hand argued and fought for political equality and power for the untouchables. He fought for a free Indian nation only because he recognized that the British had no sympathy for the downtrodden in India but only wished to rule through the existing hierarchy. Ambedkar also believed the major political party, the Indian National Congress as dominated by Brahmins and feudal in nature. As described by Omvedt (1994), Ambedkar had given the call

for an All-India Depressed Classes Conference in Nagpur, where he gave the call for,' a unitary state and adult suffrage with reserved seats and safeguards for untouchables' (Omvedt 1994: 169).

The main point of confrontation between the two leaders, that almost took on a bitter tone was that both believed that they alone were the true representatives for the interests of the untouchables. But Gandhi's was a reformative model, that sought to uplift the untouchables and make them dignified Hindus, while Ambedkar wished to give them a separate identity primarily political but also social. While the nationalists under Gandhi had agreed to separate electorate for the Muslims and a federal structure to accommodate the princely states, they wished to keep untouchable as integral to the Hindu electorate with no separate identity. To Ambedkar, without political power, the untouchables could never come out of their misery and oppression by upper caste Hindu. The final outcome of the confrontation and compromise was that untouchables had separate seat reservations but the voters were general. This is the model that is still followed.

A second detractor, a member of the Indian National Congress and initially a great admirer and follower of Gandhi was Subhas Chandra Bose, known popularly to Indians as Netaji (The leader). Subhas Bose had returned his Indian Civil Service award to the British authorities saying that he had no wish to serve the British who he viewed as oppressors. He had been forced to take this examination by his father who was the Public Prosecutor at the Cuttack High Court. He joined the Indian freedom struggle under the leadership of Gandhi and with the latter's approval was made the President of the Haripura Congress held in 1938 in Gujarat. Subhas had been from the beginning committed to a socialist India where everyone would have equal rights. However, a large number of Congress leaders such as Gandhi and Ballabh Bhai Patel had more conservative ideology and favoured a federal type of organization that would retain elements of a feudal structure. They had opposed a re-election of Bose in 1939 but in spite of such opposition by Congress stalwarts, including Gandhi, Bose

won this election to become the Congress President in 1939. But by this time Europe was threatened by war, and Gandhi had initially extended support to the British government and the Allied forces that was vehemently opposed by Bose. He subsequently resigned from the Congress, forming his own political party composed of the Left-Wing political forces, the Forward Block. The subsequent political career of Bose, is forming of the Indian National Army and joining the Germans and the Japanese against the British, is beyond the scope of this paper.

However, in spite of radical differences Bose continued to regard Gandhi as the Father of the Nation. As recorded by his grand- niece Madhuri Bose (2016: 160), Gandhi admired Bose, for his courage and determination even if he differed from him in terms of ideology. Gandhi also remained a staunch admirer of Subhas's brother Sarat Chandra Bose, whom he persuaded later to return to Congress after the tragic demise of Subhas Chandra Bose in an air crash.

The common people on the ground provided overwhelming support to the Indian National Army and Netaji remains a hero in the eyes of millions of Indians even today. Some attribute the decision of the British to leave India to the onslaught of the INA as well.

But it is clear that both Ambedkar and Bose admired and regarded Gandhi with great esteem. They had no doubts about his greatness and his stature as the architect of the free Indian Nation. Ambedkar later, was the master craftsman of the Indian Constitution, that promotes secularism in the form of respect for all religions, equal rights and freedom for all Indian citizens.

The negative force against Gandhi was the radical Hindu fundamentalists, in whose vision India was an ethnically and religious homogenous entity, whose dangerous divisiveness charged the bullets that pierced his abdomen on 31st of January 1948, barely a year after India's Independence. The fundamentalists resented what they considered as Gandhi's sympathy with the Muslims, not understanding his concept of universal humanism. Gandhi's world

view of looking at all religions as same, did not arise from his western education but from his mother's convictions. Such inclusiveness also arose from ancient Indian philosophy from the time of the Rig Veda where it is written that '*Ekam Sat VipraVahudhaBadati*' (There is but one truth and sages understand it by different names'. The Sanatana Dharma teaches tolerance as its core principle is about the soul that is inside every living being (human and non-human) and which ultimately merges with the divine spirit (*Paramatman*). Conceptualizing such unity, the people of India have shown tolerance towards all forms of beliefs and values over centuries. Yet it was in the name of this very Sanatana Dharma that Gandhi was killed. His blood- soaked garments lie in the Gandhi Museum in the heart of New Delhi, next to his memorial at Raj Ghat on the banks of the river Yamuna.

Gandhi the Humanist Visionary

About Gandhi, the great scientist Albert Einstein had written that 'Generations to come will wonder that a man such as this had walked on this earth'. From Roma Rolland to Erik Erikson, any number of prominent biographers have written his biography, his statues adorn prominent global locations like Trafalgar Square in London and Union Square in Manhattan, New York. His memorial is visited by hundreds of people from across the world. The question then arises as to what made him great? He had his failings like any other human being, he had his weak spots too. He wept at times and shivered in anxiety. But he was great in his integrity and his determination to raise himself to heights beyond human capacity and endurance. His iron resolve to remain uncompromising to his ideals, no matter what, is what set him apart.

He showed the world that moral courage and determination not to bend down before injustice is the greatest weapon that can be used to carry your convictions. He demonstrated that non-violence is the most potent weapon that can bend the enemy, far more powerful than bullets. His form of non-violent protest remains as a powerful political weapon for all the marginalized and all the people who have

no other means of protest. In this way he provided an alternative to the military masculinism that dominated the world both during colonization as well as in most of the anti-colonial protests. As a result India largely escaped the gun-culture established in the new nations long after their ideological use is gone. A peaceful though traumatic transition to Independence allowed India to establish and nurture a democratic republic that is still fairly successful. Most Indians consider the non-violent method to be superior irrespective of the actual violence that may take place. True ascetics like erstwhile president A P J Abdul Kalam are universally admired and ride high in public esteem. Gandhi had therefore managed to establish a political culture and to bring about or reinstate a philosophy that was drawn from the ancient Hindu texts but which was made relevant for contemporary conditions. He revived the notion of Ram Rajya as an attainable goal for a political regime, even though relatively difficult yet not unattainable. In fact, Gandhi had proven that nothing was unattainable or impossible to do and that a moral force always produced better results than coercion. While most colonized people engaged in armed struggles to bring about a political solution, he forced the opposite party on the negotiating table by force of moral pressure alone.

At the same time Gandhi was keenly aware of the internal contradiction of Indian society and crusaded against caste based discriminations all his life. As an upper caste Hindu he lived in close quarters with the untouchables and forced others to do the same. By breaking free of many caste and religion based prejudices he too was influenced like most African freedom struggle leaders with the ideological movements of the larger world. Like other great leaders he too had a cosmopolitan outlook such as the respect for all human beings. He deliberately crafted his own persona according to his convictions and values, subjecting his body to all forms of excesses. To be one with one’s beliefs is the most difficult goal to achieve but this is what he strove for all his life and paid for with his life too.

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